

Bad Day in Utopia

by Scott Thompson

Avy walked to the window and pulled back the curtains. "Another dark day" she whispered to herself while looking out the window at the murky sky. She looked out at the hibiscus bushes that once held deep green leaves and large canary yellow flowers that were now brown and bare and the thin, bare branches looked like they would snap in two if you touched them. The palm trees in the yard had turned dark brown and most of the palm leaves and stems had fallen to the cold, wet ground. Avy figured the skies had been dark now for just over two months. A little light found its way through the dark clouds like the light from a rainy morning sneaking around the edges of a pulled down window shade, but not even a hint of blue sky had shown itself since the Gloom started. The skies became dreary the same day the power went out and all electrical devices stopped functioning. Cars wouldn't work. Neither did the TVs, and radios, and microwaves. Everything that depended in some way on electricity was now dead - dead and useless. Food was scarce but still available in the form of rations. The police had managed to maintain something resembling order, even if it was often imposed with deadly force. Her perfect world had been turned upside down and now she was living in a world that reminded her of one of those apocalyptic movies that you watched when you were a kid late at night.

Avy moved from the window and sat on the edge of her bed and looked into her reflection in the mirror above her white wicker chest of drawers. She looked at the image with the same repulsion used to gaze upon a dead and rotting animal on the highway. She had always prided herself on her appearance, but now her long blonde, and once straight, hair was tangled. Her tan that she had obtained from countless hours on the beach had long since faded. Dark bags rested under her green eyes, and all the blemishes of her face were visible since she had run out of make-up and other items she used to perfect her complexion. I look homeless. She dressed in a worn pair of blue jeans and an off-white wool sweater. The jeans were stiff from washing them in collected rainwater and drip drying them in the shower. The sweater was a Christmas present she had received several years before while living in New Jersey. She had kept it for the few cool days that south Florida experienced each year. Now she needed it every day and this was leaving the signs of excessive wear on the garment.

It was Tuesday; the day she was issued her rations each week that usually consisted of a few cans of beans. The police had taken control of the grocery stores in the city and turned them into rationing stations and they slowly dealt the items on the shelves. During the first few weeks she was given fruit, bread, and thawed once-frozen dinners. Now the rations had shrunk and contained only a few cans of beans and whatever else could be saved. Avy put on her running shoes, her only comfortable shoes, and gathered a duffle bag for the four mile walk to the superstore grocery turned rationing station. As she double checked to make sure she had everything for the trip she thought of last Tuesday and how it reminded her how the Gloom, as everyone had taken to calling the phenomenon, turned everyone into rude, selfish, and violent people. Or maybe, she thought, they had always been that way and the bad times made the rudeness harder to ignore. During the previous week, as she was approaching the front of the line to receive her rations of canned goods a few rare loafs of moldy bread were dispersed. The crowd immediately began shouting. An old woman, frail and thin, that received the last loaf of bread was assaulted by a group of much younger women. They knocked her to the ground, kicked her, and then wrestled each other for the beaten woman's food.

The police moved in to protect the crushed elder. The small mob of hungry and angry women turned on the officers. Avy closed her eyes as she saw the law enforcers raise their weapons. Shots. Echoes. Silence. Avy wanted to run. She didn't. She was hungry.

After a week of loneliness and tears it was now again time to make the journey to the seized grocery store. Avy dared not leave her small, peach colored, stucco house unless it was absolutely necessary. Eating was necessary. Every week since the rationing had started, Avy would walk with Mr. Bogan, her neighbor from across the street. Bogan had moved from New Jersey after retirement. He had worked with the IRS or some government agency. Avy figured he was in his late 60s to early 70s but still had the strength and vigor of someone much younger. He had not mellowed with age and this short, bald man with a nose like W.C. Fields, had been foul when the skies were clear and blue and continued on with little change in his demeanor now that the skies were murky and cold. Avy thought that Mr. Bogan was the biggest jerk she had ever met. One of the only times she ever spoke with him before the Gloom was when he yelled at a friend of hers for parking in front of his house. "You can't park there! We have covenants. Get that damn car out from in front of my house you stupid bitches!"

Avy wasn't sure if Mr. Bogan liked her now or if he was just walking with her for protection. She wondered what would happen if they were mugged. Would he defend her or offer her as a sacrifice for his own life like a virgin to the gods? He showed little humanity when their world was a paradise. Why would he show any now?

"You look like shit!"

"I'd rather not talk about it. Let's get going." Avy replied to Bogan's harsh greeting.

"I hear they have some news as to what is causing the Gloom."

"Yeah?" Avy was now interested in listening to Bogan.

"Yeah, the Florida Guard is here now, and get this - they are on horses!"

Avy and Bogan arrived at the ration point after a long, cold walk through the rain and fog. Each step through the slosh made up of rain, stagnant sewage, and gritty sand was painful and strenuous, but with hunger being a primal motivator, they had trudged forward and made it.

Avy's blond hair was now matted flat against her skull and her sweater was heavy from the moisture it had absorbed. Her running shoes contained what felt like a gallon of water and sand and she wished she had something better suited for the miserable conditions. She had spent all of her clothing money since being in Florida on cute shoes and sandals and fitting sundresses and string bikinis - all useless now. She did have a raincoat, one raincoat, but she gave it to her neighbor weeks ago. He said he wasn't going to just sit and wait to die. He was sure that some global catastrophe had taken place and he thought the Florida Keys might have survived it - something about the wind patterns protecting the Keys from any fallout or whatever environmental pollutant had caused the disaster. He was going to hike to the chain of islands and find a hospitable place to live; some place with sun and coconuts. He asked her to go with him, but Avy refused. What if her family came looking for her? How would they find her if she left? And anyway, the Gloom couldn't last forever - could it?

As Avy and Bogan stepped into line she thought of her home in New Jersey and her move to south Florida. She had grown tired of the cold, the pollution, and the population so thick that it took her over an hour to get to work each day only to arrive at a boring desk job. A job full of miserable people complaining of the weather and traffic and everything else they could find wrong with the world. If she was going to have a pointless and dull career at least it would be in a better place. So she left New Jersey and found her utopia. Well, almost at least. The crowds seemed to follow her, but she did so love the warm weather, the blue skies, and the sandy

beaches - and these things made it all worth it. As long as she ignored the masses it was a perfect world. Avy loved Florida. It was almost always warm and pleasant, just like the postcards that people sent from their Florida vacations. When it rained, the rains only lasted for a few minutes. Flowers bloomed year round like they were growing in a climate controlled greenhouse. It had been perfect but the Gloom destroyed her utopia. Now she was trapped in a place worse than the place she had left. She had not seen the sun in months. It was relentlessly cold and dark, and rained almost every minute of every day. Sometimes the rains were light and sometimes it came down hard with the vengeance of a thousand out of control trains. Without the sun, there was flooding in low areas and the lakes that dotted the neighborhoods had found their way into homes, encircling them. Some low lying neighborhoods were almost submerged.

"Look up there. Just like I told you - horses! Those bastards rode horses." Mr. Bogan now chattered with the excitement of a child seeing an animal at a circus. He even smiled as he waved to two soldiers sitting high atop the powerful beast. The horsemen were dressed in full military combat clothing and gear. Their camouflage pants were neatly tucked into their polished boots. They wore heavy camouflage jackets, probably waterproof Avy thought as she looked at them in envy. Heavy Kevlar helmets sat on their heads. Their machine guns rested across their laps or were harnessed over their shoulders resting on their backs. The soldiers were strong, stronger than the Gloom. She allowed romantic thoughts to enter her head of being lifted onto the back of one of the fine steeds and taken away, of being rescued. Avy had many opportunities to have a boyfriend, but that was not why she was in Florida. She had moved to Florida to escape the binds of the real world, to experience life, and to prove to her family and to herself that she could be self-sufficient. The last two months she would have appreciated a familiar face to wake up to in her cold house each morning, but there was no dating now - only solitude. She had been a prisoner hidden in her little house, surrounded by thousands of others hiding in their houses. As the line progressed forward one of the soldiers moved his horse toward Avy and Bogan's area of the line and began to speak. From his behavior and the way the other soldier talked to him, she could tell that he was the leader. When the man on the horse neared Avy she was struck by his brawny and hard features. His jaw was squared off and his mouth clenched tight. The warrior's dark eyes were framed with crow's feet clearly displaying his experience built on a thousand days of combat. If his rank didn't demand respect his durable features and body language sure did.

"I am Captain Letum. We arrived yesterday. We would have reached you sooner but this thing you are calling the Gloom disrupted the electronics on all of our vehicles and aircraft.

Fortunately horses are not electronic", the captain said with a slight smile.

The crowd laughed at the joke and Avy realized it was the first time she had heard the sounds of laughter in months. It wasn't nervous laughter, or forced, but real laughter that only comes when people are comfortable. She didn't know if it was the corny joke or the promise of finally seeing an end to her detention but for the first time in months, she felt safe. From the sounds of those around her, the presence of the soldiers made the others feel safe too.

The officer with the hard features continued, "We were able to carry some basic medical supplies with us, but little food. FEMA is working with us to find a way to get more food to you, but for now it looks like you have enough for at least a few more weeks."

"What happened? What made the sky go dark?" Bogan yelled up to the captain in an accusatory manner like the Captain had caused the Gloom.

"The science is beyond me, but it has something to do with a large negative energy force that has settled over most of Florida. The panhandle and the rest of the world haven't been affected."

"So what caused this? Is it global warming, a nuclear war, a nuclear meltdown, pollution, the ice caps?"

"Again, I don't know. People way smarter than I am are still trying to figure it out. My job is to get you out of here."

"Then why in the hell didn't you come here for us sooner?" A lady with a strong New England accent yelled to the captain.

"We have been working our way down slowly. What were we supposed to do lady? We lost communication with most of the state and quarantine has been in place for everyone, including emergency aid workers. Lady, we didn't know what was going on down here. Satellites couldn't take pictures through the thick cloud cover. We couldn't even send in armored and air tight vehicles or even robots - nothing worked." The Captain explained that the best possible rescue efforts had failed. Still the crowd was now hopeful and talking with each other about the coming rescue and what they would do once they were out of Florida. The anger of being left for so long subsided with the anticipation of escape.

With their weekly rations, each person or head of a family received a black envelope containing instructions for the evacuation. Each envelope contained a date and a time to return to the ration station along with other instructions on what to pack and how much each person could bring. There were no specifics as to how they would be removed when they returned. "Are they taking us out of here on horse?" Avy wondered.

Avy opened her envelope quickly while keeping it close to her chest, like a presenter at the Academy Awards, hiding the contents from those around her. Her appointed time was in only three days. She had watched as each person before her opened their black envelopes. Some smiled and walked away, a few jumped around like they had just been selected for "The Price is Right", and others stomped off clearly upset. Then there were the ones that became enraged. Bogan tore open his envelope, pulled out the paper inside, and tossed the envelope on the ground. As he read his face flushed red with anger, "What in the hell! You sons of bitches rigged this! Screw you then. I'll walk out of the God forsaken state on my own!"

The Captain, still on his mount, was talking to the newly arrived at the back of the line when he heard the commotion from Bogan. He moved his horse quickly to the front where a fuming Bogan was standing and cursing to the police and guardsmen. Avy backed away sensing that this event might be similar to last weeks when the police killed the women that had accosted the old woman. Bogan heard the trot of the horse and turned quickly just as the Captain removed his left foot from the stirrup and raised his boot sharply into the underside of Bogan's chin. Thump - Crack! Avy watched as her obnoxious neighbor's head whipped back and then forward again. Bogan stood for a few seconds looking at the soldier and then he fell to his knees, his body went limp, and then slumped over on the ground. Everyone stood still and stopped talking.

"Listen to me" Shouted Captain Letum. "We are going to get everyone out of here. But you must be patient. Everyone will get their turn." His voice lowered and returned to its calm tone, "Please, work with us. We are here to help." The Captain's eyes narrowed and his jaw tightened as he fought to regain composure.

Avy walked home alone and thought of Bogan. She never liked him. He was rude and inconsiderate to everyone around him, but she still didn't feel he deserved the brutal punishment from the Captain. She left without knowing if Mr. Bogan was dead or alive. After he went to the ground two soldiers on foot came out of the old grocery store and dragged his limp body inside. She tried not to think of it. She tried not to think of the previous two months of fear and anxiety and loneliness. She tried not to think of the present. She only wanted to think about getting out of

the wretched place; the place that she ran to trying to escape a miserable environment that she seemed to have only brought with her.

On Friday, Avy packed in preparation for her departure. She stuffed a few of her favorite clothes and a few personal items into a bright red bag. She left her sun dresses and her fancy shoes and bikinis. She left all of the things that she had bought when she first arrived in Florida. She wouldn't need them anymore. The instructions in the black envelope only allowed for what would fit into an average suitcase or bag, and the frivolous items that represented her new life on the peninsula were useless now. As she went through the things in her home, she thought about the good times she had had in Florida. It was so wonderful go to the beach in January, to eat at the outdoor restaurants all year round, to dance in the clubs and drink fruity drinks and to flirt with desperate men. Avy remembered how much fun it was to do all of the things that most only did on their once a year vacations. Avy loved that flowers of one type or another bloomed almost every day in this tropical world. The beach outings, the flowers, and the constant fun - it was everything she had hoped for. Her dream of a better life had come true; at least for a while. But now it had vanished and she was left with nothing but memories and what she could fit into one average suitcase.

Avy made the long and painful four mile trek for the final time to the old grocery store and when she arrived there were a dozen wagons outfitted with large, chocolate colored horses whose muscles quivered as they waited impatiently to get to work. The uncovered wagons were made of wood and resembled something you might see on a cowboy film. You've got to be kidding. Avy checked in with a young soldier who introduced himself as PFC something or the other; she forgot his name a second after he told it to her. Her thoughts were on getting out of her dead paradise. "Wagon six", the private handed Avy a sheet of paper with her wagon number and some other personal information about herself like her social security number, date of birth, town of birth, and other standard information. "Give that sheet to the soldier driving your wagon." Introductions were low key on the wagon. Everyone looked at each other and nodded and a few shook hands and exchanged introductions. The members of Avy's wagon group consisted of two families; both with small kids, and the rest of the dozen in her group were retired couples and one old widow that so frail Avy wondered how she had survived the last two months. Avy was the odd ball of the group - alone. The wagon was uncomfortable, cold, and wet. They sat in the bottom of the wagon on the soggy, wooden floor and covered their heads with pieces of clear plastic that one of the members of her group had the foresight to bring. Avy could feel the dampness from the wagon's wooden floor soak through her jeans as she smelled the manure and sweat from the two horses that would be the wagons engines on the trip out of the Gloom. It usually took as long as six hours by car to reach the panhandle area, but she could only guess that it might take days in the wagons.

Avy dozed off for what only seemed like a few minutes but when she awoke to sounds of yelling she found that she was not in the city anymore. The wagon train had traveled several miles north of the city on highway 41. The four lane road was deserted except for a few discarded cars and trucks whose owners were unlucky enough to be on the road when they ceased to function. She had been lucky that she was at home when the Gloom fell over the peninsula and not in her car miles from home. She heard yelling from the soldiers on the horses. "This is it. Turn here." One of the soldiers on a horse barked. The other mounted soldiers repeated the orders down the line to the rear of the wagon train.

Why are we getting off of the main road? No one questioned the change in direction aloud, but from the faces of those in the wagon, Avy could tell that the others had the same question on

their minds as well. Maybe we are stopping for a lunch break. The wagons traveled for twenty more minutes down the gravel road until they came to what Avy at first thought was a construction site. The area was littered with bulldozers and other equipment she recognized from the many construction sites that until a couple of months ago were common. It seemed the building never ended. She often wondered how many more people the area could hold. Everyone was moving to her paradise. When would it reach maximum capacity? How far into the swamps can we go? She had her answer now. It would hold no more.

"Out of the wagons!" ordered Captain Letum. "Please stand next to that big dump truck over there." Letum pointed toward a mass of dark steel. Avy was surprised to see that the mood of the soldiers had changed. The soldiers were never

overtly friendly, but now they were especially suppressed keeping their heads low and not making eye contact with her or the others.

"What's going on?" The delicate old widow asked as two of the men on the wagon helped her down.

"Shut up and move." Everyone was stunned by the tone of the Captain. "Get over there now!"

"You can't treat us this way. We have a right to know what is going on. We have rights! I demand an explanation." One of the men that had been helping the widow moved toward the Captain demanding answers in a strong tone. As the man walked forward, Letum took a black handgun from a holster on his right side, raised it leisurely and without emotion fired three rounds into the chest of the inquisitive man. Avy watched in horror as the bullets exploded into the man's body causing him to recoil backwards with each strike. The angry man's face changed as he turned toward his family. He almost smiled then fell to the ground landing on his side with his eyes fixed on his wife and two small boys.

Avy's head swam as her brain tried to uselessly compute what had just happened. In the last couple of weeks she had seen several people killed right in front of her and instead of getting easier to deal with it was only getting worse. Oh God, please get me out of this place. After the echo from the gun ended there was a pause of silence that was soon broken by a shrieking scream that sounded like there was nothing else in the world. The wife of the slain man ran from her kids and tripped onto the bloody body of her husband. She pulled his flaccid carcass against her. His blood soaked her as she began to yell at the Captain and the other soldiers. "What have you done? Please, someone help me. Someone help. What are you doing? Why did you do this? No, No, NO..."

Other soldiers approached and at gunpoint, corralled everyone into a group next to the large dump truck. All obeyed the orders now without question. Avy was still in shock, her soul felt separated from the rest of her, but in her mind she became more aware than at any time in her life. She realized she was not at a construction site, but at a rock quarry. Next to the massive truck was a wide hole, not very deep, but as wide as a mall parking lot. A prod from the end of an M-16 machine gun moved her to the edge of the opening. She looked down to see hundreds, maybe thousands of dead corpses lying at the bottom in piles resembling trash bags piled high in a landfill. The rain had kept the blood from drying and the cold had kept the dead from stinking. As she looked at the bodies, she knew why she had been "rescued". They never had any intention of saving them. This was about vaccinating the country and the world from the disease that had killed paradise.

The Captain, with a face as hard as Mt. Rushmore, barked an order and the warriors began the executions. The sound of the machine guns reverberated through the man made canyon as super heated bullets found their way to the huddled mass. Children, women, men, families and all were

sent tumbling into the pit. Avy felt the hot lead collide with and rip through her soft flesh. It did not hurt and she thought that was odd as the projectile severed her spine and her body went limp. The journey to the bottom of the pit felt more like floating than falling. Her drift down ended with a thump on the heap of wet and bloody bodies. Others landed around her making similar sounds. As she rested in a supine position her eyes looked up toward the sky one last time. She felt calm and warm as her final breaths slipped from her dying shell and she watched as the dark clouds parted and exposed the blue of the sky.